

Why I Always Dress the Part

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An avid cyclist, I enjoy commuting by bicycle from my home to the ship and back each day. The ride to work is about 15 kilometers each way, mostly downhill, and I can make it in less than a half-hour, even with heavy traffic. The long ride home, up a mountain, is a great workout.

I have lots of cycling experience—I raced mountain bikes professionally for several years before earning my commission—and know how to ride safely. I never was more thankful for that experience than one day while following my regular route to work.

I had all the right equipment: bright, comfortable clothing; eye protection; gloves; an approved (ANSI, CPSC) helmet; and a reflective vest. My bike had lights, but they were off because it was well after sunrise. As always, I was prepared for anything—from riding around the block to competing in a World Cup event.

At the front gate, the ship's navigator, a frequent riding partner, joined me. We rolled

through the gate side-by-side and chatted casually about the day ahead. Saturday duty always is a bummer, especially when the weather is perfect for riding—cool and overcast—as it was this day.

We rode on, paying attention to the traffic signals, stopping for lights and signs as appropriate. In Japan, as in the United States, a bicycle on the road is supposed to obey the same traffic laws as a car. We had plenty of time to get to work but were riding briskly—nothing over the speed limit, though.

By the time we had rounded the last corner before reaching the pier, I had pulled a bit ahead of my companion but still was



traveling only 15 mph. He was slowing as he contemplated a sandwich at the McDonald's that lay between the ship and us.

Riding past the golden arches, I saw a car coming from the opposite direction. I was in the far left of my lane (remember, the traffic scheme in Japan is opposite that in the United States). The oncoming car was moving about the speed limit. I was trying to make eye contact with the driver because I wanted to be sure he saw me before I made a right turn behind him just beyond McDonald's.

A reflection in the car's windshield from the overcast sky prevented me from seeing the driver's face. I could tell, though, he hadn't slowed down, nor was he signaling a turn, so I continued on. In the time it took me to blurt out, "Oh s...!" he turned directly into my path. Our combined speed was about 25 mph as I slammed on my brakes.

My slick road tires didn't offer much resistance, and I tried vainly to launch myself up over the fender, onto the car's hood. I knew I was going to hit, no matter what, and was afraid to lay down the bike. If I did, I figured I'd slide under the wheels—and, besides, road rash really hurts!

In the split second I had to think, I misjudged my distance and came over the handlebars head and shoulder first into the passenger door. I felt my shoulder pop out of socket and had a strange feeling of collapse around my head. It's funny how many coherent thoughts cross your mind in an instant like that one. I sincerely believed I was feeling my skull being crushed. After all, the brain itself feels no pain. Luckily, my skull wasn't collapsing, but I can't say the same for my helmet and the car door.

I crumpled to the ground in a heap and immediately tried to stand. My first thought was to get out from under the wheels, but the

car had stopped. As I untangled myself from the bike, I realized that standing wasn't such a good idea, so I lay back down—I was in a lot of pain. A quick self-assessment revealed my head and neck were intact, and I had no road rash—"Yeah!" I thought. However, my shoulder definitely was injured, and I was going to need some help. My poor bike was wrecked.

Lots of people saw my mishap and arrived quickly. I spent a short time at a base clinic for evaluation. Later exams revealed a separated shoulder, a bruised kidney, and a little internal bleeding—nothing life-threatening or disabling, though. I was back at work the next day but on limited duty because my arm was in a sling, and I was taking a lot of painkillers. Two months later, I had recovered fully and felt fine. My bike, sadly, was laid to rest—along with my helmet—three cheers for the latter!

Anyone who gets on a bike without a helmet is a fool. There's no excuse good enough for not wearing one. Today's helmets weigh only ounces and actually offer more cooling than riding without one. Vents are engineered to direct airflow in an efficient manner over your noggin, so wearing a helmet doesn't have to be tantamount to putting a thermos over your head. You can obtain this protection for as little as \$40, or, for \$160, you can have a high-end model like the one I wore. My advice is, "If you have a \$10 head, wear a \$10 helmet—but at least wear something."

Sure, the car door absorbed some of my blow—I made a good-sized dent—but the helmet took all the punishment my head would have taken without a "skid-lid" protecting it. I undoubtedly would have suffered a concussion and could have been killed.

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Here are a few tips to ensure your next bike ride is a safe one—call it a bicycle ORM checklist if you want:

- Always wear a helmet.
- Wear comfortable, brightly colored clothing.
- Wear a reflective vest from dusk until dawn.
- Use lights and reflectors from dusk until dawn.
- Wear gloves.
- Wear shatterproof glasses (UV/IR protective).
- Check your tires for nicks, cuts and wear before each ride, and ensure the tires are inflated properly.
- Make sure all the nuts, bolts and connectors are tight.
- Make sure your brakes work and the cables are lubed.
- Make sure the saddle is tight.
- Make sure the handlebar grips are tight.
- Ride with a basic tool kit, basic first-aid kit, and some money for a phone call or a cab ride if you run into trouble.
- Bring water.
- Never ride off-road alone.
- Stay off sidewalks. Slow-moving pedestrians are as dangerous to you as you are to them.
- When riding in the street, obey traffic signals and traffic laws.
- Use hand signals when turning.
- Make eye contact with drivers, pedestrians and other cyclists to be sure they see you.
- Walk your bike across crosswalks. 